

Book Review

de Blij, H. (2012). *Why geography matters: More than ever* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN-13: 9780199913749. 354 pages, \$16.95.

Introduction

Why Geography Matters: More Than Ever is a revised and expanded version of the popular and influential *Why Geography Matters: Three Challenges Facing America: Climate Change, the Rise of China and Global Terrorism* (2005). In the current edition de Blij selects past and current natural and human events and their interactions in specific regions, from personal to global scales, to illustrate the essential and foundational role of geographic knowledge, skills, and perspectives in understanding complex processes on Earth.

de Blij outlines the traditions of inquiry in geography as they developed over millennia - discovery, exploration, cartography, organized descriptions of places and regions, and the current rapidly changing technological age inputting satellite transmitted remotely sensed data and imagery into computers for producing diverse arrays of maps for analyzing problems and making decisions. Geographers view the world spatially in its diverse and complex interactions among physical and human systems. A synthesizing field of inquiry, geography, is fundamental to developing a comprehensive understanding of Earth's dynamic systems.

de Blij addresses geographic illiteracy as an immediate and critical problem in the United States and describes the current underdeveloped status of geography education in elementary, secondary, and higher education institutions. He decries the relative absence of geographic understanding from many aspects of domestic and foreign policy development at the national level and decision-making at other levels. Spatial thinking is often missing as an integral part of making sound decisions and solving problems at all scales.

The author understands that the United States, through its global exercise of political, economic and military power, and cultural influence, make this nation's geographic illiteracy problematic for people and environments throughout the world. United States' citizens receive little instruction in developing accurate mental maps of Earth's major physical and political features, appreciation for changes in the character and influence of different world regions, understanding the distribution of cultural, economic and political

systems, or in gaining the ability to describe dynamic spatial interactions among the atmosphere, landforms, water bodies, and life forms. The education system is simply not helping people to take into account the importance of where people and things are located, why they are in those locations, and the ways in which all locations interact across the space of Earth's surface.

de Blij points out during the past half century the study of geography in K-12 schools and to some extent in higher education declined in the United States. Geography was discounted in favor of a strong curriculum in history or social studies courses lacking clear spatial and ecological perspectives. Some private, prestigious universities have yet to reestablish geography programs after dropping them decades ago. Their graduates who are now policy makers in political, economic, and cultural institutions did not benefit from even a single course in physical, regional, or human geography. Geographic illiteracy is manifested in numerous and disastrous ways that affect national security and the economic and environmental well being of people in all areas of the world. Citizens are not aware of the physical and cultural diversity of nations across the world and are ignorant of important phenomena, such as climate change and its implications for agricultural regions, coastal cities, future settlement patterns, or energy use within the United States. Climate change is integrally connected to geopolitical relationships among states and stages of economic development in all world regions. Human systems and natural systems are inextricably bound together. The knowledge, skills, and perspectives provided by geography are indispensable to understanding changes in Earth's systems and how changes impact human populations.

Structure and Focus

The book's several chapters begin with the overall theme of *Why Geography Matters... More Than Ever*; and moves through *Reading Maps and Facing Threats*; *Geography and Demography*; *Geography and Climate Change*; *Climate, Place and Fate*; *The Geography Behind War and Terror*; *Interpreting Terrorism's Geographic Manifestations*; *Red Star Rising: China's Geopolitical Gauntlet*; *Europe Superpower in the Making or Paper Tiger of the Future?*; *Russia Trouble on the Eastern Front*; *Africa in a Globalizing Word*; and concluding with *Epilogue: More Than Ever*. Because there are far more insights and well stated arguments in these chapters than can be fully explored in a book review format, I will identify some of the more salient points across the chapters.

The author affirms that acquiring skill in the language of geography though map study, map interpretation, and map evaluation is a key component of geographic literacy. Effective map interpretation requires the reader to be aware of the mapmaker's limitations and potential for legitimate errors or in some cases deliberate deception. Maps may be used for propaganda or to promote a self interested point of view. Reading maps requires knowing more than scale, direction, legends, and projections. Maps should stimulate questions and their accuracy and purposes must be questioned.

Earth's population has reached seven billion and is projected to exceed nine billion in this century. The relationships between environments and human population over time, including size, age, sex and ethnic composition, density, and changing spatial distribution need to be understood as enduring and influential factors contributing to the presence or absence of the well being and sustainability of human cultures and Earth's ecosystems. The resources, technology, logistics, political organization, and international cooperation required to adequately house, feed, educate, and provide health care and community security for this rapidly expanding and urbanizing population is a gargantuan challenge. This is especially true in the face of probable natural and human induced disasters, failed and failing states, weapons of mass destruction, and spreading global terrorism. The power of geographic knowledge is critical to understanding these interrelated phenomena.

Knowledge of the long-term cycles of climate variability and the influence of natural events and human activities on climate change provides a context for contemporary climate change and human responses to its consequences. Such knowledge is necessary if people are going to adapt to changing environmental circumstances and modify their behavior in relation to resource use, energy development, and the risks of the continuing intensely damaging pollution of air, land, and water.

Understanding the underlying political territorial structuring of the human population into states that comprise world geographic realms is required to gain insights into reasons for wars and the expansion of terrorist activities to more places. Dramatic place to place differences in Earth's physical geographic features and the diffusion of widely differing cultures continue to play significant roles in the clashes of human groups ranging in size from villages to empires. Some of the geographic aspects of war and terrorism change over time but such intense conflicts remain linked to clashes in worldviews among civilizations, tribalism and nationalism, competition for territory and resources, and dominion over others. The conflicts are intensified and amplified by changes occurring in the technologies of warfare and weaponry.

Major geopolitical shifts are underway as seen in the rise of China to global economic and political influence as it seeks resources in many world regions to fulfill domestic needs and to assure future economic, political, and military development. This rise must be taken into account in adaptive and assertive ways by the United States and other nations. China's huge and diverse population displays historic tensions of ethnic and territorial origin and sharp differences among rural and urbanizing populations. China's economic, social, and political needs must be managed well if internal tensions are to be kept in check. China's global reach poses potential for serious conflict with the United States. Geopolitical realignments are disruptive and geographic knowledge is essential in navigating the changes.

Europe's evolution from disparate and warring states into an emerging union of economic and political systems to produce a single powerful world scale actor is still in progress and the outcomes are uncertain. As the work on unity progresses, individual states have different perceptions of how to proceed and how to make equitable decisions. Tradeoffs are inevitable and changing notions of sovereignty are required. Russia, the world's largest state by territory is beset by problems induced by its size, the diversity of its constituent parts, its numerous bordering countries, the shrinking size, and negative changes to the well-being of its population. Russia has many seemingly intractable internal and international political and economical problems stemming from its authoritarian history and having been the largest, most powerful republic in the former Soviet Union armed with a formidable nuclear arsenal.

Africa's geopolitical significance to future global power arrangements should not be underestimated. Its sheer size and abundance of coveted natural resources, its diverse and extreme physical features, and its large number of political units torn by internal strife resulting from European colonization and arbitrarily formed states that contain competing groups with longstanding animosities. These challenging complexities are amplified by the historic diffusion of contending religious systems and beliefs. Africa is now and will continue to be the setting for geopolitical struggles among major powers competing for resources and among terrorist organizations trying to establish safe havens.

Harm de Blij is one of a small number of contemporary geographers who possesses a nearly encyclopedic knowledge of the physical and human features on Earth's surface. His vast storehouse of knowledge about specific places and regions and their development over long periods of time is not static. Rather, as with the phenomena he has studied, he applies an enthusiastic appreciation and insightful understanding of Earth's physical and human

systems and the interactions among them. Using autobiographical reflections, he sometimes merges his personal scale geographical experience and geographical phenomena at other scales. These vignettes from his youth and his later extensive worldwide fieldwork and travel are a legitimate way to illustrate the deep connections between early personal experiences in specific places and the geographic knowledge we are able to gain and use later in life.

Harm de Blij casts a wide intellectual net and captures many topics and issues in one narrative. It is an intellectual challenge to identify, categorize, explain, analyze, and place difficult topics in a coherent context for your readers. Good generalists have sufficient depth and range of knowledge in each specialty that they can make very meaningful and salient connections among the parts. On the other hand, the accomplished generalist cannot have equal depth of knowledge and experience in specialties. He strikes a healthy balance between dealing with the big ideas and enduring topics while still providing sufficient factual knowledge and concrete descriptions and explanations.

The Political Geography of the Education System

The intellectual case establishing the importance of geographic knowledge is clear and de Blij is convincing in urging citizens to value geographic knowledge and to take actions that foster spatial thinking. He is not a lone voice. Leaders of geography organizations across the country have advocated changes over the past several decades. Some important progress has been made. More will be accomplished.

Why haven't sufficient improvements in geography education taken place? What are the practical problems facing those who agree with de Blij that geographic literacy must be strengthened? Although de Blij does not specifically address these questions, one answer is clearly geographic.

The political, spatial structure of the United State's education system is a formidable impediment to the adoption of high quality geography programs in the nation's schools. The absence of a single overarching authority guiding the educational system leads to a cacophony of conflicting interest groups and inconsistent policies and programs. Divided education decision-making authority among federal, state, and local governments shapes and complicates the political geography of the entire schooling system. States have the power to develop and implement school curricula and they vary widely in how much autonomy is granted to local school districts. Although through consolidation, the number of school districts has declined by tens of thousands over the last

75 years, there remain over 14,000 districts spread across the 50 states. The decision to offer geography and at what grade levels is often the prerogative of local school administrators and school boards. Local control of schooling is a longstanding issue in educational change.

Substantial educational and political movements are underway to improve student and school performance by implementing a nationwide state by state adopted core curriculum in English, mathematics, and science. These efforts are showing some initial success. On the other hand, civics, economics, geography, and history are contested content areas subject to intense political controversies and conflicts over what to teach and how to teach it. Geography curriculum topics, such as climate change, environmental problems, and population studies, can arouse strong emotional and conflicting responses among segments of the public. For those reasons, and others, it will be extremely difficult to establish a common core curriculum in geography that will be adopted by all states.

The presence and quality of geography curricula are affected by many factors. Typical school systems have many courses in history or courses with history content and history teachers teach many of the geography courses. University teacher education programs require more history than geography. Many teacher preparation universities have no geography courses and offer substitutes that lack a spatial perspective. State certification regulations often require little preparation in geography as compared to other subjects. School boards, administrators, and most citizens are unaware of the foundational nature of geography. State standards of learning may mandate little geography compared to history and school districts may rely on infusing geography into other subject areas rather than providing stand-alone geography courses. In addition, Earth Science courses are most often a separate curriculum strand and environmental science courses may supplant geography in some districts. In the face of these obstacles, achieving a stand-alone geography course across several grade levels continues to be a daunting task.

Conclusion

Readers will find different parts of the book appealing depending on their backgrounds, interests, and expertise. Students, teachers, academics, and policy makers will benefit from reading the book and considering its persuasive argument for why geography is a foundational subject that provides fundamental knowledge, indispensable spatial and environmental perspectives,

and the geospatial skills required to comprehend the spatial patterns and connections among humans and nature.

In the end, there are no easy and short-term remedies for major widespread improvements in geographic literacy. Nevertheless, for the benefit of future generations, concerned citizens should work in their own school districts and states to enhance geography teaching and learning.

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